

ECT

“It’s Mine!”

Helping the child who takes things from others

by Polly Greenberg

Dear Polly,

Alice, a 4-year-old in my class, is extra possessive. She grabs from everyone and can’t share. I think this behavior may stem from her home life. I’ve noticed that her parents always seem frantic about work and constantly talk about buying the latest luxury items. Alice often brings to school new toys that her parents have bought her. With two children younger than Alice, her mother often seems frazzled and weary. Is there anything that I can do as her teacher?

You can do more than you think. Conscientious teachers have more influence on parents than many assume. Because you suspect that Alice’s parents’ frenzy and focus on possessions is part of her problem, you should invite them to a relaxed parent/teacher conference. The following is a good model for any parent/teacher conference.

- Arrange informal seating so that you aren’t sitting on one side of a table with them on the other.
- Offer them a soft drink or cup of tea.
- Start by describing positive things about Alice’s personality.
- Present the problem, and ask if they notice this behavior at home.
- Let her parents know that there’s no list of things they “should” do. Instead offer them some ideas they may want to try to help curb Alice’s behavior. Suggest that Alice’s fights over possessions may be exacerbated by the stress she feels about getting “enough” love, food, or privileges. These feelings are common in children with siblings. Alice may be experiencing stress over the most important possession of all—her parents.
- Inform Alice’s parents that these anxious, competitive feelings are affecting her behavior in school. Assure her parents that you will do what you can to help at school. Mention that anything they can do to reassure Alice about getting enough at home will help reduce her need to snatch and clutch.

Establishing Identity

Part of Alice’s problem may stem from her struggle to establish her individuality. One

way we all do this is by collecting and clinging to possessions. As adults we say, “See who I am? I’m a person with a large house filled with nice things.” Alice seems to be overly attached to possessions. Setting an example that loved ones are more important than objects can be helpful to her.

You can also help Alice create an identity in other ways. Ask her about things she likes and the activities that interest her. Encourage her to value friendships rather than objects. Try having her brainstorm a list of traits by finishing the sentence “I’m a person who...” She might say:

- ...likes to paint.
- ...likes to talk with Daddy about dinosaurs.
- ...likes to talk about the food we cook together.
- ...loves to play with Mozie.”
- ...is kind to kids who get hurt or are sad.

And you can add as a reminder:

- ...is generous and thoughtful and can share well.

Give Her Time

Everybody knows that parenting young children takes time and patience. Remind Alice’s parents that they’ll have more of both if they don’t feel overwhelmed by all that they have to do. Keeping up with the latest cars and expensive vacations can be put off, but supporting children can’t. Inform Alice’s parents that it’s likely that their children will squabble less about possessions if they enjoy a leisurely relationship with each of them. Let them know that a child who doesn’t feel that she must edge out others for attention will usually feel less obligated to haggle over possessions.

Provide Power

The main things young children feel they have control over are toys and turns. Offer Alice control over appropriate decisions such as which of two kinds of juice she wants, which cup, which story, and which of two dress-up items she wants to yield to someone in a dispute. The more control she feels she has, the less she will feel she has to prove her power by refusing to share. Also, try to structure play situations so that each position has advantages and allows Alice to feel important.

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